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**DRUGS, INCARCERATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD LIFE: THE IMPACT OF
REINTEGRATING OFFENDERS INTO THE COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this **qualitative study** was to investigate the aggregate impact of incarceration **on** the quality of community life in areas experiencing high concentrations of incarceration. Throughout the report, incarceration generally refers to a two-prong process: the process of leaving the community to be incarcerated, and the process of returning from prison to the community. To investigate the impact of this dual process, we conducted a study of two Tallahassee, Florida, neighborhoods that had been previously identified as having high rates of incarceration relative to other locations in that city. We reviewed **historical** and contemporary **documents** and, employing a snowball approach, we interviewed over 30 local officials, community leaders and social service providers to gain an understanding of the social, **political**, and economic context of the neighborhoods. These individuals were also instrumental in providing initial referrals to residents. After pilot tests and screening interviews, we conducted individual interviews and a series of four focus groups (led by a professional group facilitator) with 39 people either living or working in the neighborhoods, 13 of whom were ex-offenders. Our approach was first to ask respondents for general commentary about the processes of **individuals leaving** for and returning from prison on themselves, their families and their communities, and then to explore the **responses we** received to these opening probes.

Our analyses identify four domains **in** which removing and reintegrating ex-offenders effects individuals, families and the community-at-large. While some of the impacts are positive (public safety) our respondents **also** emphasize the negative aspects of incarceration and reentry in their lives, through: (1) Stigma—incarceration carries a negative social status, often becoming an individual's master status, which is transferred to family and community, shaping the way others view residents and ex-offenders alike; (2) Financial—incarceration and reentry has adverse effects **on** the financial capacity of offenders, their families, and the neighborhood as a whole; (3) Identity—residents and ex-offenders who experience a loss of self-worth and self-esteem struggle to shift their identity in positive directions; and (4) Relationships—interpersonal networks are disrupted **in** multiple ways—spousal and parent/child relationships become strained or severed, and relations between neighbors can grow distant. The aggregate effect reduces the capacity of social supports for all concerned. To this list, ex-offenders add the problem of "pressure," which permeates their reentry experience.

These four domains illustrate how high rates of incarceration might destabilize communities by damaging the human capital of the residents, the social capital of networks of informal social control, and the credibility of the justice system in the eyes of people who see their communities afflicted by systems of inequality and injustice. To address these problems, we offer 16 recommendations that serve as a comprehensive programmatic response to the problems that arise from high rates of incarceration concentrated in certain communities. We conclude by suggesting areas for further research.

REVIEW OF MAIN FINDINGS

Our participants were animated in their discussion of incarceration, and their various comments point to a complex relationship between incarceration and community life in their neighborhoods. In some ways, they see removal of offenders as a positive force. Arrests that remove prostitutes and drug dealers benefits public space, and seeing offenders receive a just punishment is considered appropriate. Residents also told stories of ways in which some people posed trouble for families and friends, and when they were incarcerated, things improved for everyone else. Nobody objected to the existence of prison, and there were frequent enough calls for stiff sentences for drug offenders and often harsh penalties, especially for sex offenders and those who hurt children.

As Meares (1997) has observed about inner-city residents and the police, our participants are troubled by the problems caused by the criminal justice system as well as by crime. By far, our participants reserved their most spirited comments for voicing their objections to the way removal and reentry sometimes damages their communities. Through their experiences and perspectives, they repeatedly pointed to the problems that stem from high incarceration rates. Although the Resident Groups emphasized slightly different concerns than did the Ex-offender Groups, both groups described ways that removal and reentry had an impact on their lives in four broad arenas: financial, stigma, identity, and relationships. Ex-offenders particularly expressed difficulty with the pressures of reentry. In the preceding two chapters we discussed these issues in detail; here we provide a brief summary.

Most directly, respondents discussed the strong and multi-faceted financial effects of incarceration on their lives. For general residents it was true that incarceration sometimes

provides temporary relief from a relative needing help to get out of trouble, but at the same time families are often disorganized after the loss of a financial contributor (even if not through legal means) and hampered by the increased financial burden of visiting loved ones in prison, paying for the cost of phone calls, housing and feeding returning offenders. Neighborhoods suffer too, from high concentrations of returning ex-offenders when employers are betrayed by ex-offenders they hire, when housing values drop due to an increasingly negative community reputation and when patrons stop frequenting stores where unemployed people congregate outside. Not only do ex-offenders suffer financially from their inability to find employment upon their return to the community, but they also have financial needs for housing, clothing and transportation that they cannot meet.

The second area discussed by our respondents was stigma, a problem that is omnipresent in their lives. Ex-offenders reported being incapable of overcoming the label of "offender." This results in their inability to successfully reintegrate into the community due to subsequent (and sometimes chronic) unemployment, the unwillingness of landlords to rent homes to them and general distrust by police and members of the community. Furthermore, stigma often is transferred from individuals to their families, sometimes causing them to withdraw from community life in shame, both when the offender goes to prison and upon his return. Stigma is transferred to the community as well, resulting in a loss of the area's reputation as a good place to live and do business.

Our respondents discussed the problem of identity, telling about a pervasive loss of self-worth and self-esteem, not only among ex-offenders but among general residents, particularly children, living in the community. The loss of positive role models for children is seen as an

especially important problem caused by incarceration, because it interferes with appropriate adult supervision of children, and often leads children to see crime and imprisonment as their destiny."

Most residents, however, feel that ex-offenders can be positive role models when they return to the community if they make an effort to share with the children their process of change and their improved attitudes. Finally, incarceration has an impact on community-level identity by causing residents to feel hopelessness and apathy about the prospects for change.

The fourth area of concern was the ways in which incarceration altered the dynamics of community relationships. While removing an active offender from a family sometimes has the benefit of improving relationships among remaining family members, this process frequently damages them too. For instance, spousal and parent-child relationships are strained or severed, families sometimes experienced isolation from neighbors due to stigma or shame, and residents' relationship to ex-offenders and their families are attenuated out of caution, suspicion or fear. Public social interactions also are effected; increased police surveillance acts as a disincentive for law-abiding citizens to congregate openly since it often invites unwanted police attention.

To these themes, ex-offenders added a concern about the pressures of reentry, citing the difficulties in finding jobs; getting housing, and reestablishing relationships with family and friends. Criminal justice vigilance is also described as a source of strain, which become particularly problematic at the time when adjustment is most tenuous. The existence of pressure makes an already daunting set of adjustment challenges seem impossible for some ex-offenders.

The way ex-offenders describe their experience of reentry using a different frame of reference illustrates something about the community-level dynamics of removal and reentry.

They are connected processes, but they may be different in their community-level effects. All

respondents identified consequences of both processes, but residents were more specific about the effects of removal, while ex-offenders spoke more directly to the effects of reentry, and our findings reflect this fact. Removal portends a set of gains and losses that affect tangible matters' in a person's life, such as finances and relationships, and social issues as well, such as stigma and identity. These individual effects add up across cases to constitute a broader, community level impact. Regarding reentry, however, the collective impact is less clear. Families discuss the way they welcome returning offenders back into their group, and neighbors describe the ways they seek to tolerate a new arrival upon reentry, even as they grapple with suspicion about that person's & in the community. And it is likely, of course, that there is some upper limit on the ability of a community, particularly one that is economically disadvantaged, to financially and socially absorb, and physically house large numbers of hard-to-employ residents. But while our respondents were sometimes able to describe community-level implications of high rates of removal, they had difficulty identifying similar level impacts of reentry, even though concentrated rates of reentry—? the natural consequence of high rates of removal. Instead, reentry was more commonly seen as producing individual- and family-level implications that did not seem to extend to the broader community.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The four impact domains described above are important, both because of the immediate problems they cause for communities experiencing high rates of incarceration and also because they have implications for long-term community stability. At the outset of this report we laid out the idea that community stability would be affected by incarceration through its impact on human

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